"being person with *akal*, a person who could resist *nafsu*" p. 173). Surprisingly, in the quest to become *mukmin*, they do not have intentions to disrupt established religious perceptions and practices that men are the religious authority of the family.

The previous point leads into the conclusion of the book, that pious Malay women who flourished within Malaysian Islamisation do not necessarily challenge or resist male authority, as usually understood in feminist discourse. Their desire to submit to God's will, include taking on traditional gender roles as devout housewives, are more important, rather than the need to resist the patriarchal norm. This book provides an original assessment of Muslim women's experiences as religious subjects, whose acts and meaning of piety, are contradicted in the conceptualization of agency in feminist theory. Despite the limitations mentioned, this book is rare. It does not only present the more nuanced unique features of Malay women and Islam as an already distinct feature of women in Southeast Asia, but it also postulates a different perspective of agency within feminist thinking.

(Kurniawati Hastuti Dewi・Graduate School of Asian and African Area Studies, Kyoto Univercity)

Yos Santasombat. *Flexible Peasants: Reconceptualizing the Third World's Rural Types*. Chiang Mai: Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD), Chiang Mai University Press, 2008, 287p.

This book is an outcome of the author's extensive study on the importance of local knowledge and biodiversity in relation to ethnicity and community-based natural resource management. It discusses representations of peasant society in northern Thailand since around 1990. Based on his study of political elites in the 1980s, his experiences in the movement for democratization and for community forests, the author discusses the political strategies among rural and minority people claiming rights vis-a-vis the state. This book is a result of his long-term studies in Nan and Chiang Mai Provinces in northern Thailand and it demonstrates his framework for understanding peasant society and its changes in Thailand.

Among Thai researchers studying peasant society, political movements among peasants and transformation of peasant identity have been key points in exploring how peasant society has been transformed in the face of modern socio-economic changes in Thai society especially after the 1980s. In Thailand, political peasant movements' claims to land and livelihood rights became active following the implementation of land-use policies and development projects, and the rise of a popular movement against the government. Thai peasant studies have insisted on the possibility of resistance against the state by peasants, contrasting peasant society with the urban one in discussions on peasant identity formulated against authority as well as on subsistence livelihood.

Particularly in northern Thailand, where there are people referred to as "hill tribes," political movements claiming land rights and their relationship with ethnic representations are prominent issues in recent studies, as we see in Chapters 2 and 3 of this book. In this movement, Karen, one of the ethnic minority groups, are represented as indigenous forest protectors who live in harmony with nature. There has been much discussion pointing out that this unified representation of Karen, their sustainable agricultural practice and their relation with their traditional culture, runs the risk of undermining their claims for a greater share of natural resources and development assistance. On the one hand, NGOs and academics who have perpetuated this representation regard the strategic effects of such political claims as being more important than recognizing the varied realities of actual Karen communities regarding commercial and agricultural changes, including the fact that many Karen today engage in commercial agriculture and wage labor rather than subsistence rice farming. In contrast, those who are critical of such views claim that this kind of idealized representation potentially contributes to the marginalization of Karen farmers and

excludes the Karen from elite and state discourse, especially in regards to agricultural practices [Walker 2001]. Regarding this argument, the author clearly adopts the former position, emphasizing the strategic importance of this symbolic representation of Karen against hegemonic discourse and the state. Moreover, he claims that this ethnic representation makes Karen themselves conscious of their local knowledge as useful and stimulates them to re-value their culture and identity in the process of struggle (see Chapter 3).

In this book, the author situates the symbolic value of peasant representation within broader contexts. He explores the different ways in which rural groups in northern Thailand are struggling and experimenting with various forms of symbolic representations of themselves and their communities in their resistance towards the state, other agencies and interests. In this process, issues of local knowledge and biodiversity become paramount to claims for human rights as well as community rights over resource management in relation to ethnic representation. With the two key points above, he tries to grasp the complexity of rapidly changing peasant societies in the context of modern industrialized agriculture and nation-wide hegemony over peasants, and attempts to re-conceptualize northern Thai rural societies and peasants in more dynamic and flexible ways.

In the introduction, the author reviews the history of peasant studies and shows how these previous studies adopted a unilinear framework of evolutionary development to argue that peasant society represents the lowest stages of development and the primitive "other" counterpoint to the "self" posited by civilized society. He also points out that in analyzing peasants in the context of social and economic changes, some researchers have discussed the persistence of subsistence economy, while others claimed the disappearance of peasantry due to capitalist expansion. Yet, none of these studies dealt with the dynamism that exists between subsistence production and commodity production. As a result, these studies have propagated a form of peasant essentialism, and the author argues that such a perception is not appropriate for understanding peasant society today.

How, then, can we re-conceptualize the peasantry? Chapter 1 traces the history of socio-economic changes in peasant society in northern Thailand and argues for the re-conceptualization of the peasantry. Firstly, peasant identity has to be understood as flexible. In contrast to the power of the nation-state which manipulates rural and marginalized people's identities, human rights and eco-politics came to be related to ethnicity. In this situation, we need to develop ethnographic and political forms of representation that correspond to flexible rural identities. Secondly, the author insists that in the northern Thai context, expanding the issues from those of classical peasantry to ones that incorporate ethnicity opens up new possibilities. This represents a shift in the politics of social space from the narrow productionist issues of agrarian policies to broader issues involving not only the struggle for land but also the struggle for control over symbolic value and its use in the construction of collective identities, which can be suitable for dispossessed, marginalized and heterogeneous populations. This is why even though the book refers to "northern Thai peasantry," the author includes not only northern Tai lowlanders but also ethnic highlanders such as Lua and Karen in his discussion.

In Chapters 2 and 3, the author explores how the ethnic identity of highland minorities is situationally reconstructed within the context of changing power relations and socio-economic conditions, especially with regards to the struggle for forest land rights.

Chapter 2 is about the identity formation of Lua people, one of the ethnic highland groups in Nan Province whose daily lives are intimately linked to shifting cultivation. Since the late 19th century, forest areas deemed to be commercially profitable were granted to logging concessions through some forest policies, and local forest users were condemned as forest destroyers. But after a major landslide in 1989, the Royal Forest Department radically shifted management priorities from commercialism to conservation, which strictly restricted shifting cultivation and forest use. This has

increasingly threatened the security of local villagers. In response, Lua villagers in the region, NGOs and grassroots activist groups, demanded access to forests and swidden fields while opposing the designation of the forest areas as a national park. Through the politics of place, and through religious rituals that re-established their sense of place as the first inhabitants and rightful owners of the land and increased ethnic consciousness, the unity of a community in resistance was formed. The author thereby claims that Lua land has been conceptualized as the site of struggle, a contested terrain of symbolic-material practices and of ethnic boundaries, which continue to produce the opposition between Lua and others.

Chapter 3 demonstrates the relationship between the cultural production of Karen ethnicity and the political economy of symbolic power in the contest over legitimacy of resource-use. The author traces the construction of the Karen image during the past two decades as forest guardians and conservationists against hegemonic state discourse which condemns them as forest destroyers. That is, some of the Karen themselves, as well as NGO leaders, promote the strategy of investing Karen local knowledge in political action in order to reinforce their identification as "children of the forest." Through this, the negative identities embodied by the Karen through their negotiations with the state as denigrated hill-tribes, illiterate peasants and forest destroyers are transformed into a single social political category of "indigenous forest manager." The author concludes that when ethnicity enters the terrain of environmental issues in areas with peasant populations, then the conventional politics of agrarian reform evolves from a struggle for forestland as a means of production to "territory" as a space within which not only autonomous production but also the reproduction of "cultural identity" can take place.

Chapter 4 reveals the process by which peasants re-discover their cultural traditions of farming local varieties and diverse crops in order to remain innovative and flexible. Since the 1960s, the government has tried to use only a few high-yield species of rice and peasants no longer have complete control over their production system, both in terms of knowledge about production and the paths to acquiring such knowledge, as well as control over actual varieties of local species. Nowadays, however, many peasants have begun to revert to practicing small-scale diversified agriculture and converting cash crops to paddy in order to reduce production risks. The author concludes that Marxist and modernist theorists are wrong to argue that the growth of commerce will uniformly convert peasants and local production from traditional into modern. On the contrary, cultivars' diversity and knowledge can be retained, revived, and re-developed in many peasant communities. These peasants demonstrate their capacity to reconstruct new images of biodiversity managers in order to create a more dynamic symbolic representation of themselves.

Chapter 5 presents the analysis of changes and dynamism of peasant economies in northern Thailand by revisiting four villages which had been studied by anthropologists during the past 50 years. Thai peasants have been coerced into increasing dependence on external political, economic, technological and cultural forces. In summarizing this process, the author states that because of these influences, Thai peasants' identities and social roles are flexible, diverse and self-contradictory, capable of responding to varying and particular situations, conditions, and locations. For example, northern Thai peasants are continually faced with increasingly complex economic decisions including fishing, growing vegetables for consumption, petty trade, and wage labor. Furthermore, the peasant economy is never confined to subsistence activities such as rice production alone. This is akin to being both peasants and laborers at the same time. Thus, the author concludes that an adequate ethnographic study of rural northern Thai communities should situate them within broader transnational and global contexts that effectively dissolve such anachronistic binary oppositions as rural-urban, traditional-modern and peasant-proletariat.

Summarizing the main arguments in Chapter 6, the author reveals how the re-conceptualization of "flexible

peasants" is useful in understanding rural people within dynamic relationships and with multiple identities. His point is that contemporary rural politics is increasingly elaborated in terms of human rights, community rights over resource management, and ethnicity. This provides an important arena in which new images and identities of contemporary peasants are constructed and represented as protectors of forests and managers of biodiversity. It also marks a shift in the anthropology of peasants from the idea of peasants as "unitary objects" to "complex subjects," and furthermore, forces us to take into consideration the significance of the peasantry as a social force.

In a situation where previous studies on peasants and their political movements have emphasized the hegemonic construction of a discourse of subsistence livelihood and its relationship with peasant identity or a discourse of idealized rural life, this book is valuable in arguing in favor of how peasants themselves have managed and reformed their own representation subjectively in several concrete situations against the hegemonic discourses of the state. On the other hand, in the author's eagerness to stress the subjectivity of peasants, the book lacks due consideration of the process in which these discourses surrounding subsistence and ethnicity have been mutually constructed by peasants themselves, on the one hand, and hegemonic power on the other, in the face of socio-economic changes, not only in the political arena but also in everyday life. We can say that this book provides us with a starting point for further investigation of how these discourses affect the everyday life of rural people, how they are re-constructed and negotiated, to what extent these discourses regulate or influence people's options, and what kind of options are available in a particular situation.

(Tazaki Ikuko〈田崎郁子〉· Graduate School of Asian and African Area Studies, Kyoto University)

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